



A LARGE
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Focus on wolf poaching in Scandinavia



All that remains of the radio-collar from an adult female lynx "Julia". The collar was found by a fisherman in a plastic bag on the edge of a river downstream from the area where she was last located

The rural landscapes of Norway and Sweden appear idyllic. Small red and white painted cottages, quiet farms, endless forests, abundant wildlife, and a prosperous, peaceful and law-abiding society. At the end of April and early May the state TV channels in Norway (NRK) and Sweden (SVT) showed a two part documentary that gave the public a glimpse of a shadowy underworld that lives behind this idyll. Using undercover agents with hidden cameras investigative journalists gained the trust of local contacts, and collected evidence that wolf poaching was widespread and organized in the rural communities straddling the Norwegian-Swedish border. The first program in the series "the hate" portrayed the extreme negative emotions of some local people towards wolves, and as the title indicates, the main driving force behind the poaching is simple hatred for wolves and all other large carnivores. The second program "the triangle of death" focused on undercover work in a limited area on the border where most poaching is concentrated.

The undercover team recorded conversations with several people claiming that they had shot wolves illegally, sanctioning wolf poaching, and offering to help the undercover journalists take part in illegal hunting. One person provided the journalist with tissue samples from two wolves he claimed had been shot. DNA testing revealed that these samples came from a pack on the border, one sample was from a radio-collared wolf that had vanished, and DNA indicated that the other wolf came from the same pack.

The journalist team also collated all information about wolves that have been found poached and research wolves that have suddenly vanished in the 30 years since wolves were protected. In total, they present evidence for poaching from 20 cases of non-research wolves, and 18 cases of wolves from research projects (mainly radio-collared). Some of these research wolves were documented as

being shot, but many simply vanished from their normal area. In these cases most wolves were suspected as being shot, but several were deliberately run-over by cars or snow-scooters. More disturbingly, there have been two episodes in Norway where poison bait has been placed out in an attempt to kill wolves.

Poaching is not limited to wolves. All of the research projects in Scandinavia that have worked with large carnivores have had cases where radio-marked animals simply vanish, and despite intensive searching from the air, never are found again. In other cases the evidence is more concrete. Animals are found with gun-shot wounds, and radio-collars are found that have been cut off, or smashed. A recent review by the Swedish Environmental Protection agency indicates that based on the estimates from research animals, the contribution to mortality from poaching in Sweden can be up to 25% of wolves, 10% of bears, 15% of wolverines and 10-15% of lynx. The study area with which I am most familiar is in southeastern Norway where we have radio-collared lynx since 1995. During this period at least 10 of our study animals have died at the hands of poachers. This equals 10-20% of known mortality.

Both Scandinavian governments have increased their focus on the issue, but whether any of the planned actions will achieve results remains to be seen. Despite the well documented episodes, there have been only a handful of arrests, and very few successful prosecutions. Refreshingly, four people have been fined, sentenced to jail and loss of hunting rights in two separate cases in Norway where poison has been distributed in the forest with the intention to kill wolves, even though there is no evidence of wolves being killed. On the other hand a local court in Norway found a number of sheep farmers not guilty for driving snow-scooters (without permits) into the mountains, and digging out and shooting a wolverine from a natal den, even though the facts of the case were not contested. There is clearly a long way to go before local courts, and even local police, regard poaching of large carnivores as a real crime. There is little doubt that the active poachers represent a tiny and extreme minority. However, very few people in the rural communities speak out against them, largely through sympathy, but also partly through fear. Witnesses in court cases have been threatened, and our own experience from the field is that poachers operate in relative open defiance of the police.



Adult male lynx "Tor" found shot by poachers in southeastern Norway, August 2003

These problems are not confined to Scandinavia, but appear to be widespread throughout Europe. In some countries, management of large carnivores has simply been left to the poachers, creating an unofficial policy of "benign neglect". As to whether or not poaching represents a long-term threat to the survival of any large carnivore populations is not yet clear. The main consequence is that it creates a huge uncertainty in large carnivore management. As a result, management has to be even more conservative than it would otherwise have to be, which again can cause conflicts. It is possible to have the best legislation, the best science, the best population models, the best action plans, but it can all become useless without enforcement on the ground.

It is hard to know how to effectively combat poaching. Clearly enforcement of existing legislation is needed. This requires that the police and game wardens receive the necessary resources, and that courts take these crimes seriously. However, most of all it requires a change in public opinion among rural communities, which in turn requires education, the reduction of conflicts, and most of all time. In

most countries, the poachers of today grew up in an era when the extermination of large carnivores was a state sanctioned (and sponsored) cause. The change in policy to one of conservation reflects a dramatic U-turn in societal values during the last 20-30 years. We have come a very long way, and many large carnivore populations are responding accordingly. However, we still have a long way to go in pursuit of our elusive goal of coexistence.

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